Gender, change and resistance: Men's response to women's networks in the Australian sugar industry

Barbara Pini
Postdoctoral Research Fellow
&
Dr Paula McDonald

School of Management
Queensland University of Technology

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Paula McDonald

Queensland University of Technology

In the latter part of the twentieth century a number of farm and rural women's networks were established throughout Australia. One of the reasons why such groups were established was to address the paucity of women in leadership positions in mainstream agri-political groups. This paper explores how men in male dominated agri-political groups have responded to this gender equity strategy. Using data from a doctoral study examining women's participation in the Australian sugar industry I examine the discourses within which men in the mainstream agri-political group, CANEGROWERS, have positioned women's networks and the women involved in networks. These are discourses which construct women involved in networks as lacking in femininity and which re-inscribe normative definitions of femininity and masculinity in agriculture. These, it is argued, act in powerful ways to regulate and contain women's involvement in agri-politics.

Introduction

In concluding her 1998 study of women and leadership, Sinclair (1998, p. 179) offers a positive note writing that 'change is not only possible it is likely'. However, she also adds a note of caution that this 'will not occur without resistance and conflict. Many people have much at stake in maintaining the status quo'. Sinclair's (1998) assessment is well-supported through other work on men's resistance to gender equity in organisations (for example, Cockburn, 1991; Halford, 1992; McKay, 1997; Kenway and Willis, 1997). This paper examines the question of resistance to equity by drawing on data from a doctoral study of women's participation in leadership in the Australian sugar industry. Documenting the rise of these groups geographer Elizabeth Teather (1995:10) hypothesised that 'a backlash is to be expected from male dominated organisations as women in the agricultural industries pursue their goals of raising their profile'. However, since Teather (1995) made this claim, and despite an ongoing academic interest in rural women's networks and the increasing degree of influence these networks have achieved (Fincher and Panelli, 2001), the question of resistance to rural women's networks has not been widely examined.

Gender, identity and resistance in the context of Australian agriculture

This paper draws on a feminist post-structural framework (Weedon, 1987; Sawicki, 1991in order to examine the way in which gendered subjectivities are constituted, appropriated, challenged and transformed in the arena of agri-politics. Implicit in such a framework is an understanding of identities as conditional, fractured, multiple and partial. Masculine identities and feminine identities are thus understood not essential, natural or immutable, but as socially constructed through a range of historically, socially and culturally specific practices, beliefs, processes and interactions labelled 'discourses' (Weedon, 1987).

We are all exposed to a range of discourses – including a plethora of discourses of gender. For feminist poststructuralists a key focus of research has been to expose the dominance of particular gender discourses and the relationship between these discourses and power, as well to examine as the way in which women can alter, critique, disrupt and subvert dominant gender discourses (Alcoff, 1988). Feminist writers in rural sociology are no exception. In two of the earliest papers in the discipline which drew on a feminist poststructural framework, Mackenzie (1992; 1994) focused on the Canadian group, Women for the Survival of Agriculture, and subsequently on Ontario Farm Women's Network (Mackenzie, 1994). These two organisations are illustrative of the types of farm women's networks that emerged throughout Europe, Australia, the United States and Canada in the latter part of the twentieth century. The genesis of such groups is attributed to a range of factors including the downturn in agriculture, the impact of the urban women's movement and women's frustration at men's dominance of leadership in mainstream producer groups (Wells and Tanner, 1994; Teather, 1998). The usefulness of Mackenzie's (1992; 1994) work was that she identified the way in which traditional agricultural gendered subjectivities were being challenged by the new networks. The networks, she explained, were using humour, women's stories and formal research projects to create a 'reverse discourse' in which the identity of 'farm wife' was being reconstituted as an important and equal 'partner' in the farm enterprise. As Liepins (1995: 5) wrote, in a similar study of another new farm network – Australian Women in Agriculture - farming women have been 'increasingly legitimated' through these networks and 'this has enabled women to claim the right to greater participation in industry debates and action'.

The feminist poststructural examination of the agricultural sector has understandably developed further since this first body of scholarship cited above. One of the most recent trends has been for writers to turn their attention to the way in which gendered identities are constituted in the arena of mainstream producer groups. This is well demonstrated by work undertaken by Liepins (1996; 1998; 2000) and Brandth and Haugen (2000). Despite the fact that they draw respectively on data from Australia/New Zealand and Norway their findings are very similar. Common to the construction of the identity of farmer and agri-political leader in these different countries is the privileging of masculinity. While these agricultural identities draw on different discursive constructions of masculinity – for example, the agri-political leader is conceptualised as intellectually strong while the farmer is physically strong – both subordinate femininities. These dominant discourses then regulate the asymmetrical gendered social relations of agriculture serving to normalise and naturalise women's exclusion from agri-politics.

This paper is informed by the two key themes which resonate throughout this body of literature. The first is that farming and agricultural leadership typically draw on discourses of hegemonic masculinity. In this way men's power and women's subordination have been legitimated in the sector. The second is that changes are occurring in the constitution of agricultural identities, and that women are now actively creating space through farming women's groups for an identity of farmer and agricultural leader which is inclusive of feminine subjectivities. This paper is concerned with the impact of the interplay between these two themes. It asks: What has been the reaction from the male agricultural leaders as farming women have begun to enunciate new agricultural identities which are different from those which have traditionally defined the sector, and which have typically afforded men status and power, and justified the systematic exclusion of women?

Context: Australian sugar industry

The Australian sugar industry covers three states, but is largely concentrated in Queensland where there are approximately 6 500 growers compared with 650 in New South Wales and 20 in Western Australia. Many of the small towns along the eastern coast of Australia have been built on the industry and continue to rely on it economically. For example, a significant proportion of the population in any cane growing community is employed in one of the 26 mills established to process raw sugar. The majority of these cane enterprises are owned and operated as family farms while the remainder (less than 2%) are operated as private companies. There is some variation in size across these farms, but the average is 80 hectares.

Cane farmers are represented by the agri-political group, CANEGROWERS. It was first established in 1926 and today employs a staff of 100 located in district offices in cane growing areas across the state of Queensland, as well as in a central state office located in the capital city of Brisbane. CANEGROWERS is presided over by three tiers of elected leadership - local branches, district committees and a state-wide board of 26 directors. Of these 181 elected leaders, only two are women.

Methodology

The examination of networks reported in this paper is part of a larger doctoral study which focused on women's participation in leadership in the Australian sugar industry. The study was conducted in partnership with the agri-political organisation, CANEGROWERS.

Two case studies conducted in the cane growing districts of Mackay and Herbert River provide data for this paper. These districts were specifically chosen because women's networks had been established in both areas. While the district of Mackay has a population of over 70 000, and the Herbert River district a population of 15 000, farming women who were part of the study typically were members of smaller communities of 2000 to 4000 within the area. Over the course of the research four visits were made to each of these case study sites for participant observation and liasing with participants.

As well as participant observation, semi-structured interviews were used to provide data for the case studies. Five interviews were undertaken with district managers and deputy managers as well as fifteen elected leaders of CANEGROWERS to provide a local level perspective on the research questions. Follow-up interviews were held with all participants. The final data collection tool in the case studies were focus groups (see Pini, 2002). Forty women in each of the sites participated in initial and follow-up focus groups approximately six months apart. Of the eighty women, sixty-nine had participated in the local women's networks and were contacted through this involvement. Those women not involved in the networks were contacted because of recommendations made by CANEGROWERS' staff or other key informants. Typically these were women who were 'visible' because of their involvement in some aspect of the industry apart from the networks.

Collectively, the case studies generated a large amount of rich and descriptive data. In keeping with the feminist intent of the project this data was supported by a reflective journal I maintained throughout the research (Pini, 2003; Pini, 2004). In the process of writing the over three hundred pages of journal notes over the three years I actually undertook an ongoing analytical process. In the final year of the study, I collated data using the qualitative software program NUD*IST VIVO (Qualitative Data and Solutions, 1999). This assisted further interrogation of the data, but because of my journal activity was another step in the analytical process rather than a singular or penultimate step.

What emerged through this analysis was that the networks had been highly successful in that they have provided the opportunity for women to gain knowledge in an environment which is safe and supportive, the chance to socialise and find comradeship amongst people with similar experiences and the possibility of personal development. This however has not limited the resistance to the networks generated by some of the CANEGROWERS' elected members. Before focusing on the nature of this resistance, the following section provides a brief background to the history and structure of the groups.

Background to the networks

The factors contributing to the emergence of the new farm women's movement described in the above introduction have also influenced the establishment of networks for women in the Australian sugar industry. Firstly, both networks emerged during periods when the sugar industry in general and the local areas in particular were experiencing severe problems. The first network was established in the town of Mackay in 1991 when drought and low commodity prices caused considerable hardship in the industry. The second was formed more recently in the small town of Herbert River in 1998 when a rat plague, three seasons of severe cyclones, crop disease and low returns led to what an industry leader described as 'one of the worst crises in memory' (Ashfeld, 2000: 23). Secondly, the formation of both groups was further influenced by the broader women's movement and more specifically, by the emergence of other state-wide, national and international rural and farm women's groups. In Mackay, women who established the network had been involved in the formation of a broader rural women's group and, as one woman said, 'thought it was a great idea'. In Herbert

River, the local extension officer who called an initial forum to gauge the level of interest in forming a network said she simply thought 'given this day and age, women should be involved'. Finally, the groups have emerged because of women's frustration with masculine control of the producer group, CANEGROWERS. Women involved in establishing both of the networks have previously stood unsuccessfully for leadership within the mainstream organisation. Network goals also refer specifically to increasing women's representation in mainstream sugar industry leadership.

The two networks have elected executive committees which meet every second month. In the intervening months, open meetings are held which typically feature a guest speaker and a question period. Between forty to sixty women attend most meetings. Since being established, the networks have also offered a wide range of education and training programs on topics relating to personal development, future planning, change management, chemical use, workplace health and safety, stress management, industry leadership and business management. The Mackay network also hosted a conference in 1998 attended by three hundred people which show-cased local female leaders.

Despite these considerable achievements the networks have been subjected to resistance campaigns from a number of elected CANEGROWERS' leaders. The following section describes the forms this resistance took when the groups were first established.

Early resistance

When the networks were first established they had to deal with what one focus group member called 'a lot of teething problems'. One such 'teething problem' she described was being denied resources by the mainstream organisation to conduct business. This was magnified by the fact that there was (and still is) no formally established policy on the relationship between women's networks and the parent body, CANEGROWERS. For example, one of the network women in the Herbert River explained the difficulty they had in attempting to advertise an education and training forum. Staff at the local office at apparently lost or forgotten to include a flyer about the forum in a newsletter to growers. In this instance, as in others, women described innovative strategies to circumvent difficulties such as using the local extension staff employed by the state government.

Another early difficulty experienced by the networks was being ridiculed by male leaders. The Mackay group, for example, was called the 'knitwork' rather than 'network' by a number of male elected members. Similarly, the Herbert River network which used the acronym DEFOS as its working title in publications to stand for 'Developing Education with a Focus on Sugar' was variously called 'Don't Educate them For Our Sake' and 'Different Education for Old Sheilas' by some of the male organisational leaders. The networks were further undermined by men who dismissed them as irrelevant, based on the view that women had nothing to contribute to industry leadership. One woman explained:

> Angela: They figured that, what would a woman know to start with? What good is it going to do? Well, why the bloody hell have it? What good is it going to do? They're not going to do anything for the industry anyway. Basically they thought that it was a waste of time. (Mackay, Focus Group 6, July 1999)

Data from the focus groups and interviews revealed that this early resistance against the networks - positioning them as inconsequential jokes - has largely been surpassed by different forms of resistance. In the district of Herbert River women were clearer about when they had noticed a change in the positioning of the network than were the

Mackay women. This may reflect the different ages of the networks. That is, the Herbert River network women may have been more readily able to recall events in the network's evolution than the Mackay women whose involvement spanned almost a decade compared with just two years.

Herbert River women pointed to the allocation of funding from an outside research organisation as the point of change. This three year funding provided the network with resources independent of CANEGROWERS, and enabled them to conduct education and training for women, attend conferences and conduct other networking activities. In one focus group, executive members of the network remembered a senior CANEGROWERS' staff member commenting that 'you're getting a bit big for your boots aren't you?' after telling him of their grant. 'We knew then that they thought we were a threat then,' one commented. How the leadership of CANEGROWERS has dealt with the Herbert River group subsequent to the receipt of funding, and the Mackay group in the later years of its formation, is discussed below.

Later resistance: Mobilising power through discourse

The central way in which men have resisted women's networks in the sugar industry in more recent times has been to draw on hegemonic discourses of gendered subjectivities. This has taken a number of forms. One method has been to undermine the feminine subjectivities of women involved in the networks describing them as 'having balls', 'ball busters', 'those women in pants' or simply 'men.' Women involved in networks have also been described in disparaging terms as feminists. In this discourse popular negative constructions of feminists as being devoid of traditional femininity – as 'bra-burners', 'man-haters', and 'rough and angry' – were invoked.

Some CANEGROWERS' leaders added strength to this discursive construction of the networks by characterising industry politics as tough and rough and positioning women as naturally inclined towards a domestic role. One emphasised that it 'is just the way we're structured' for the 'wife to stay home and keep the home fires burning' while the husband involved himself in agri-politics. Another argued that while women were 'always welcome' at CANEGROWERS' meetings they do not attend because they are 'at home putting the kids to bed, making sure their homework is being done and the washing up is done and deciding on what meals will be cooked tomorrow'.

By constructing women's exclusion from agri-politics as a 'natural' outcome of their feminine subjectivities, women who do seek inclusion are, by definition, lacking in femininity. The positioning of women involved in networks as having something 'wrong' with them was illustrated in a focus group where a woman described the reaction she had received about her involvement from a male relative who asked her why she would want to belong to the women's network when she wasn't 'deprived of anything at home'.

Women involved in networks have been constructed as demonstrating a range of 'unfeminine' behaviours. This is because they have not just attended agricultural meetings, but have also spoken up at meetings and asked questions of elected members. They have been positioned as 'negative', 'ratty', 'radical', 'there for the glory' and ultimately wanting to 'take over'. Instead of being appropriately 'feminine' in a nurturing, supportive and communitarian manner, they have been portrayed as self-serving, destructive, divisive and untrustworthy. For example, in replying to what the local women's network had achieved a Mackay elected member stated:

> Elected member: There is still the perception that they're getting carried away and trying to muscle in through the back door. Some of them have been pretty

> prominent in general meetings and in the press lately. They had a lot to say about the new industry legislation. They've used the media and public meetings to question some of our decisions and it makes people worried that women are taking over. (Mackay, In-depth Interview, February, 2000)

What is asserted in this extract and a common motif in interviews with CANEGROWERS' elected members is the re-assertion of the agri-political space as legitimately masculine space. Men's proprietorial rights over the agenda, processes and activities of the organisation are clearly marked by the elected member as 'ours'. While there were approximately ten women to one hundred and fifty men at the particular public meeting being described by the elected member in the above extract, this is enough for him to suggest that the unnamed 'men' ('people') of the organisation are concerned that women are usurping men's authority.

In reality, few of the women involved in the networks to whom I spoke expressed a desire to be involved in formal positions of leadership. In general, their aspirations were limited to wanting to understand and learn about the industry. One commented that 'I don't think I've ever wanted to be a leader. I just wanted to know that if something happened to my husband that I could cope,' while another said, 'I don't want to be King Pin or President or anything like that. I just want to be able to be involved'. This was quite different, however, from how the networks and network women were represented by some elected members. One woman described the reaction she received from a male relative who questioned her involvement in the network.

> Marian: One said to me, "What do you want to do, get on the tractors and take over our jobs?" That was said to me, and I said, "No. We just want to learn about the industry and help you with your job." I think in this area a lot of men just want to protect their women.
> Interviewer: How do they see that as protecting their women?
> Marian: Not to rough them, look after them in general. That the physical type of work is a man's job and the women shouldn't have to get their hands dirty. (Herbert River, Focus Group 7, August 1999)

The gendered connection between the identities of 'farmer' and 'agri-political' leader are clearly demonstrated in this extract in the way Marina's relative conflates her involvement in the network with an on-farm physical role. She may have been working to recreate a new gendered identity around her involvement in agri-politics, but she is told that no such identity exists as the masculine territory is marked out by the possessive pronoun 'ours'. The jobs on tractors are 'ours' according to the men. Marian is acutely aware of this saying that the goals of a group such as DEFOS would be to help but the jobs remain those of men. In Marian's discursive construction men have proprietorial rights not just over particular machine based jobs but also over 'their' women. The paternalistic discourse of 'protection' is positioned as being in the best interests of women. Thus, women are being 'looked after' when they are discouraged from, or disallowed to, participate in on-farm physical work or industry politics. The dirty and rough roles undertaken in these spheres are deemed inappropriate for women.

Just as they attempted to challenge the construction of themselves as 'taking-over', so too did network members seek to challenge the positioning of themselves as 'feminists' and offer a different perspective on their aims. In an article published in the local paper in the Herbert River one of the network Executive stressed the network's aim to improve women's education, knowledge and skills in relation to agriculture. She emphasised that there was 'nothing further from the truth' in the accusation that the group was made up of 'radical feminists' (Stevenson, 2000 53).

Other focus group members expressed similar sentiments explaining they would not be involved in anything if it was 'feminist' or 'divisive'. One stated:

> Cynthia: I'm all for DEFOS, not from any bra burning aspect… I would be the first one to pull out if it was them and us. As far as I am concerned we're just another branch. We're the women's side. With the men working together. It should be a united thing for all the community. We should be all working together because we're all the same thing aren't we? (Herbert River, Focus Group 5, August 1999)

Both Cynthia and Nicole's comments are illustrative of the role many of the farm women saw themselves as having and point to how powerful a discourse which characterises them as divisive can be. They do not see themselves as undertaking education about the industry for their own benefit, but view it as important for how it may assist their husbands, family and broader community.

This positioning of the network and the normalisation of the men's dominance of the mainstream organisation was, like other discourses, used as a powerful form of resistance against women's active involvement in CANEGROWERS. This resistance was well summed up by one of the elected members who expressed disappointment at what he called the 'campaign to slow down the women's group'. He explained what this meant:

> Elected member: Oh, slow down well… you just don't recognise them, you discredit them to a large extent. Farmers talk around the place and you just don't help and pass on information. You can do all sorts of things if you want to discredit a group and when you're in a position like this, there's probably lots of things you could do that could make them a bit weak. (Herbert River, In-depth Interview, August 1999)

What is clear from this extract is that those male farmers and agricultural leaders who actively mobilised discourses against the women's networks did so with an understanding of their discursive power and the impact of this power on women's participation in the groups. The full implications of men's deployment of these discourses is explored below.

Conclusion

This paper has demonstrated that while discourses may liberate and offer possibilities for positive change in women's lives, they may also repress and constrain (Barrett, 1991; Bordo, 1988). Women within the Australian sugar industry have utilised the spaces provided by the formation of networks to engage and articulate discourses of farming, agriculture and leadership which have opened up a range of new subject positions. They have, as a consequence, unsettled the assumption that the identity of 'farmer' is unquestionably male by asserting that there is nothing dissonant in being both a 'woman' and 'farmer'. They have as well created room for feminine subjectivities within agri-politics through practices such as engaging women in education and training programs and encouraging women to attend industry meetings These identities are, however, fragile and contingent in light of men's discursive resistance against them, and in terms of the asymmetrical power relations through which they are deployed and circulated.

In the towns of Mackay and Herbert River male agricultural leaders and farmers have knowingly utilised particular discourses – those that have served them well in the past - for re-inscribing their own positions of power and for defending this power. They have attempted to re-gender the agricultural public space on to which women have trespassed and given emphasis to the supposed masculinities embedded in the identity

of ‘agri-political leader’. As a concurrent strategy they have focused attention on normative discourses of femininity which position certain behaviours, attitudes and interests of women as ‘natural’ and others as ‘unnatural’. They have also attempted to regulate and discipline women involved in networks by constructing their involvement as demonstrating feminine subjectivities which are at worst non-existent and at best pathological. Network women have, for example, been stigmatised as unfeminine for demonstrating behaviours such as attending male dominated producer groups and asking questions of their elected leaders.

In turn, women involved in the networks have, as agentic subjects, resisted these constructions of the groups and themselves. What is interesting is that they have sought to address the questioning of their femininity by conveying that their interest in agri-politics is as ‘wives’ and members of ‘farm families’. They have positioned themselves as wanting to ‘help’ and work co-operatively and in partnership to assist their husbands and communities. The ‘new’ agricultural identity they are attempting to construct is thus closely grounded in some very traditional notions of hegemonic femininity. However, it is still strongly resisted by CANEGROWERS’ leaders.

In dealing with CANEGROWERS’ leaders women have had great difficulty in nullifying the representation of their networks as ‘unfeminine’. There are two reasons for this which testify to the way in which discourses can be powerful when they are institutionalised and when they can be linked to other dominant discourses (Weedon, 1987). The first of these is CANEGROWERS’ organisational strength. It has enormous physical and financial resources as well as a legitimacy and credibility with state and national governments, other industry groups and the agricultural media. Within the sugar industry it thus has the power to monopolise the dissemination of discourses of what it means to be a farmer and leader and for these discourses to be afforded status and authority. The second factor which has made it easier for CANEGROWERS’ leaders to marginalize the networks is that the discourses engaged by the leadership are effectively supported by some of the ubiquitous discourses of gendered identities and management which are ‘known’ as ‘truths’. These are discourses which align organisational leadership with masculinity and any female involvement in leadership as unfeminine; classify women as generally difficult, emotional and unforgiving and therefore a problematic presence in organisational life; and identify women’s rightful place as being located within the home rather than in the public sphere.

This paper has corroborated Shortall’s (2001) statement that women’s industry networks risk being ‘outflanked’ by mainstream producer groups and that they can be effectively ‘organised out’ of mainstream agricultural politics. Moreover, it has demonstrated at a localised and discursive level the way in which this can occur. Why such a deconstructive approach to the question of the interaction between women’s networks and producer groups is necessary was evident to me in conducting focus groups for this research. In the groups women typically were more able to name and label those strategies which had a material form such as being denied resources. It was for many, as one commented, more difficult to ‘put your finger on’ the way in which men utilised what Blackmore (1999: 136) has called ‘discourses of denigration’ as forms of resistance, and moreover, the way such discourses are implicated in the gendered power relations which characterise the agricultural context. This is because as Bartky (1990: 74) writes, ‘the disciplinary power that inscribes femininity in the female body is everywhere and it is nowhere’. It is critical then that scholars interested in facilitating women’s increased participation in agricultural leadership give attention to illuminating this type of male resistance. It is through such work that we can begin to make visible the otherwise obscured way in which some male agricultural leaders are seeking to resist the small gains women have made in terms of agricultural equality by deploying particular discourses. We can thus refute discourses which suggest that there is something questionable and problematic about the gendered subjectivities of women involved in networks, and instead highlight that what is questionable and

problematic is the continued privileging of masculinities and subordination of femininities within the dominant discourse of agriculture.

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